

A person in a white coat is walking away from the viewer down a path in a cemetery. The path is flanked by a dark metal fence with decorative finials. The background is a dense forest of bare trees, and the entire scene is shrouded in a thick, blue-tinted mist, creating a somber and eerie atmosphere.

FOLLOW YOU HOME

Bestselling author of *THE MAGPIES*

MARK EDWARDS

**FOLLOW
YOU
HOME**

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The Magpies
Kissing Games
What You Wish For
Because She Loves Me

WITH LOUISE VOSS:

Forward Slash
Killing Cupid
Catch Your Death
All Fall Down
From the Cradle

MARK EDWARDS
FOLLOW
YOU
HOME

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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Author's Note

Parts of this novel are set in Romania. I have taken some liberties with the geography of that country, including the route taken by the night train from Budapest to Sighisoara. The town of Breva is fictitious, as is Thornberry Bridge in London.

Part One

Hungary–Romania
August 2013

Chapter One

The overnight train to Sighisoara, due to leave Budapest at eleven, was running late. The station was quiet and unwelcoming, bars and shops shut for the night, figures lurking in the shadows around the edge of the building. We sat on the hard floor, tired after a day wandering around the city in the summer heat with our backpacks. A gang of teenagers hung about nearby, shouting and posturing and badgering passers-by for cigarettes. A middle-aged man approached us, asking if we needed a hot meal and somewhere to stay, his oily smile vanishing as we shooed him away. Armenian police strolled about in pairs, scrutinising us suspiciously as they passed by.

So we were relieved when the train finally pulled into the platform and more travellers, though fewer than I expected, appeared as if from nowhere.

As we were about to board I pulled Laura against me and said, 'I love you.'

She kissed me. 'I love you too, Daniel. Even if you are a tightwad.'

'Hey—' I began, but she turned away, hauling her backpack onto the train and throwing a little smile over her shoulder that told me she wasn't really mad with me. I followed her.

Passing the cosy, private sleeper compartments, I wondered if I'd made a mistake. It had been my turn to buy tickets and instead of booking a private sleeper compartment I had, at the last moment, bought seats in standard accommodation because they were half the price.

Laura noticed me looking through the window of the sleeper and stopped to join me. 'It's a shame, really,' she said.

'What is?'

'Well, I was quite looking forward to having sex on a train. I've never done that before.'

I slapped myself on the forehead. 'Do you think it's too late to change the tickets?'

But she laughed and went through from the relative luxury of the sleeper carriages into standard class. Laura surveyed the empty carriage and chose a pair of seats at the far end. She took her Kindle and a bottle of water out of her bag and settled back on the double seat, upholstered a long time ago in grey velvet, trying to get comfortable. I sat by the window, hoping the train had air-conditioning powerful enough to blast away the night's humidity. I took my glasses off to wipe the sweat from my face and put them back on in time to see a young couple running along the platform. They made it just before the train shuddered and lurched into motion. An announcement crackled over the speaker system and we were on our way.

The couple I'd seen running for the train almost fell into our carriage, panting, the man laughing while his female companion looked pissed off. They were carrying overnight bags, which they hefted into the baggage rack before taking the seats across the aisle from Laura and me. I smiled at them, then averted my eyes. Although we had befriended a number of couples on our trip around Europe in a transient way, exchanging email addresses and Twitter usernames, I preferred to observe

someone first, make sure they weren't crazy before engaging in conversation.

—~~Going purely by appearance, they were a curious, mismatched couple. They were both in the~~ mid-twenties but I would never have put them together. He was short and stocky, with cropped blond hair, and was wearing a khaki T-shirt and cargo pants. An average-looking guy who clearly spent a lot of time at the gym. In contrast, the girl was dressed all in black, with a leather jacket over a Strangle T-shirt, plus tight jeans and biker boots. Her hair was black to match her clothes, with streaks of crimson. Beneath hooded, heavily made-up lids, her eyes were the colour of *café noir*. A shade away from black. She was several inches taller than him, about five foot ten, so when standing she towered over him, reminding me of Olive Oyl and Popeye.

They talked to each other in their own language. Eastern European, obviously, though I was unable to tell if they were from Hungary, Romania or some other part of this half-continent.

As the train made its way out of the city, another passenger came into the carriage from the other end. He was about forty, stocky, with cropped hair and an acne-scarred face. He had no luggage. Even though most of the seats in the carriage were empty, he sat diagonally opposite Laura and me. He appraised us, apparently not liking what he saw, then closed his eyes and fanned himself with a newspaper.

I watched Budapest go by, the lights of the city blinking out as the journey progressed.

'I need a drink,' I said after a while. 'There should be a dining car open on the train somewhere.'

'Not till it crosses the border.'

I looked up. It was the guy across the aisle. He shrugged good-naturedly and said, 'The dining car doesn't open till we reach Romania. In'—he checked his watch—'around two and a half hours.'

'I knew we should have bought supplies in Budapest.'

'Don't worry,' he said, jumping to his feet. 'We have plenty.' He fished a heavy carrier bag out of his luggage and crossed the aisle to sit opposite us. After a pause, his companion followed, settling down beside him and crossing her legs. He cracked open two cans of Hungarian lager and passed them to us before we could protest.

'I'm Ion,' he said, opening two more cans and taking a sip from his. 'And this is Alina.'

Chapter Two

The train windows were matte-black, the darkness broken only by the occasional glimpse of lights in the distance. I glanced at my reflection, my face stretched like melted plastic by some kink in the glass. It was creepy. I looked away and turned my attention to our new companions.

Ion laid his free hand on Alina's knee, stroking it. So they *were* an item.

'What brings you to Romania?' he asked, grinning broadly. Beside him, Alina wore a more muted smile, seemingly bored.

Laura answered before I could. 'We're travelling round Europe. We've spent the last few weeks lying on beaches—'

'Nice.'

'—but we wanted to visit Eastern Europe, soak up some culture instead of rays.'

Ion nodded. 'Good choice. Romania is the most beautiful country. Of course, there are many problems—poverty, with the Romani gypsies and so on.' He waved a hand like this was a boring topic. 'But this is real Europe. Far more interesting than a Spanish beach.'

I noticed that Alina rolled her eyes almost imperceptibly.

'So you're from Romania?' Laura asked Alina, trying to draw her in.

'Yes.'

Laura waited but no more words were forthcoming.

'She's from Sibiu,' Ion said. 'That's where we're heading now, to see her folks. I can't wait to see if Alina's mom is as smoking hot as her daughter.'

I smiled. 'You speak excellent English. I hope that doesn't sound patronising . . .'

'No, not at all. That's where Alina and I met—at English classes.' He moved his hand further up his girlfriend's leg. She remained stony-faced. 'So where have you been on your journey round Europe?' he asked, looking from Laura to me.

I took a deep breath. 'We started off in Brussels, then travelled down through France, then Spain, a week in Ibiza, then into Italy—Rome and the Amalfi coast—then over to Greece, up through Croatia into Hungary.'

That was it. Two glorious months condensed into a shopping list. The details, the memories were precious to Laura and me. The trip, our Grand Tour as we self-mockingly labelled it, had been transformational. Being typical tourists on the Eiffel Tower and round the Louvre, people-watching and feeling all the knots in our muscles untie themselves as we finally relaxed after what had been an intense period back home. Going wild in Spain, dancing and drinking at the Benicassim music festival, clubbing all night and sleeping all day in Ibiza. Shopping and hiring scooters and more shopping in Rome. Making love on a beach on the Amalfi coast, lying under the stars and talking about the children we'd have when we got back to England. Snorkelling among a rainbow of fish on

Santorini. Posing for so many photos in the Plitvice Lakes National Park that I began to feel like my soul was being eroded.

This was life, really lived, really experienced, a passage of magic that would flash before our eyes when we died. And to share it, to live through these experiences together, meant that Laura and I were closer than ever.

Talking to Ion and Alina, giving them this bare-bones outline of our trip, made me miss my best friend back home, Jake. He was the one person, apart from Laura, with whom I could be fully open and honest. Whenever I got the chance I emailed him with long accounts of what Laura and I had been doing, like I was sending him pages from my diary. In return, he told me about all the exciting stuff that was happening with him back in London, as he continued to work on making it as a musician.

I paused, wondering how much more to tell these strangers, not wanting to go into the details of how, in the last few days, in Dubrovnik and Budapest, fatigue had caught up with us. Maybe we were feeling homesick, despite the great time we were having, or feeling the human urge to settle, to spend a period in one place. But our legs felt heavier and it was hard to gather much enthusiasm for these two magnificent cities. Laura suggested heading back to Italy or Spain, renting an apartment and staying put for a while, but I was insistent that we had to continue the Tour. Press on with the plan. After Romania we were going to head north again: Russia, Germany, then Scandinavia. The Tour was scheduled to end on my thirty-fifth birthday in Stockholm. Then we would fly home, back to London

To get married. To start a family. Not necessarily in that order. Laura's own best friend, Erin, was pregnant, and I knew as soon as Laura met Erin's baby she'd be keen to get pregnant as soon as possible. And that was fine by me.

'And it's just you two?' Ion asked.

'That's right.'

'Sounds like you've had an awesome time.'

'It's been . . .'

'Too good for words, yes?'

'You got it.'

Before I could say any more, I noticed Ion frown in a surprised way at Laura, so I turned my head in her direction. She looked uncomfortable.

Ion said, 'Hey, I'm sorry if we're intruding. We can go back to our own seats . . .'

'No, no, it's not you.' She leaned forward, and both Ion and I echoed her so we dipped into a huddle. Alina remained sitting upright.

'Don't look,' Laura said. 'But that guy over there keeps staring at me.'

I couldn't help but look up. The man with cropped hair who had entered the carriage after Ion and Alina had his eyes open now and was reading a newspaper.

'Are you sure?' I asked.

'Yes,' she hissed. 'He was . . . staring at my legs. He's doing it now.'

I looked again and the man's gaze drifted upwards to meet my eye. His expression was inscrutable but he maintained eye contact in a way few people in England would do. Eventually, with a humourless smile on his lips, he returned to his newspaper.

'Let's swap,' I said to Laura, and she moved to the window seat so she was out of the stranger's direct line of vision. In a way, I understood why he was looking at her, with her strawberry-blond hair, blue eyes and legs that were like the eighth wonder of the natural world. Tonight, she wore shorts, because it was hot, not because she enjoyed being stared at.

She should have been out of my league. Luckily for me, she was attracted to tall, geeky guys with glasses. My hair is an average brown colour, I'm too skinny and I look a little like the guy who

gets sand kicked in his face in the old ads. But luckily, there are women out there who are attracted to guys like me rather than to the guys kicking the sand.

While Laura moved over, Alina turned round and frankly stared at the man, who was watching us again. Eventually, he looked away, a sneer on his face.

‘You come across a lot of guys like that,’ Ion said, ‘who think it’s OK to stare at women like they’re in a shop window. Alina gets it all the time.’

She nodded once.

I took Laura’s hand and gave it a quick squeeze. I knew she would be feeling embarrassed so I said, ‘Let’s change the subject.’

‘Good idea,’ Ion said. ‘So what do you guys do? When you’re not travelling?’

‘Laura works in marketing,’ I said. ‘For a children’s charity.’

‘Interesting.’

‘It’s really not,’ said my girlfriend.

‘But you’re doing something good.’

Laura sipped her beer. As the biggest lightweight I’d ever met, she would be tipsy by the time she’d finished. ‘It’s better than selling Coke,’ she said.

Ion widened his eyes.

‘I mean Coca-Cola.’

The three of us laughed. Alina was still flicking hostile looks at the guy opposite.

‘I guess you two don’t have kids?’ Ion asked.

‘No,’ Laura said, at the same time that I replied, ‘Not yet.’

He looked between us curiously.

‘This is our last big trip before we start a family,’ I said.

‘Try to start a family,’ said Laura. ‘You can’t take anything for granted. Not when you’re my age.’

‘You’re only thirty-four.’

We’d had this conversation many times. This was one of the reasons why we had come on this trip now. Laura’s biological clock was growing ever louder—she said she felt like the crocodile in *Peter Pan*, with a timepiece ticking inside her—and I was ready too. But after seeing our friends with children restricted to exhausting family holidays, I had suggested to Laura that we go on a big, final trip before we started nesting. And the trip was made possible by a stroke of good fortune—or rather the result of a long period of intense work.

‘What about you?’ Ion asked me.

‘I’m a developer,’ I said. ‘I created an app for iPhones and iPads and sold it to one of the big tech companies.’ As ever, I was concerned about sounding modest, rather than boastful, when talking about this.

‘Which is how we could afford to come on this trip,’ added Laura.

‘Which company?’ Ion asked. ‘Let me guess—Google? Facebook?’

‘No, Skittle.’ Skittle were one of the biggest of the new crop of tech companies that had sprung up over the last couple of years, specialising in mobile apps.

‘Wow. That’s beyond awesome. Did you hear that, Alina?’

She dragged her attention away from the window and nodded at me. ‘Great.’

‘So, are you famous in England?’ Ion asked, eyes shining.

‘No! I’m barely even famous in my own flat. What do you two do?’ I wasn’t allowed to talk about my app until it was officially announced; I had signed a confidentiality agreement. I deliberately aimed the question towards Alina, whose reticence was making me uncomfortable.

But Ion spoke up before his girlfriend had a chance. ‘Alina’s an illustrator.’

‘Really? What kinds of things?’

—‘Comic books,’ she said, meeting my eye. For the first time, I saw a spark of something other than boredom. Pride, plus a hint of defiance, as if she expected to be mocked.

‘That’s so cool,’ I said, genuinely impressed.

‘Yeah,’ said Ion. ‘We’re going to collaborate on something, aren’t we?’ He rubbed her knee.

‘So, what, you’re a writer?’ I asked.

Before he could open his mouth, Alina said, ‘He does nothing.’

The volume was turned down on his smile. ‘That’s a little unfair.’

This was interesting: the sudden crackle of tension between them.

Ion turned his smile up again, but removed his hand from her knee. ‘OK, so I am between jobs at the moment. But I’m writing a book. Along with the, you know, thing with Alina.’

‘What’s it about? The book?’

‘Oh, just, like, my personal philosophy. Thoughts I’ve had about . . . stuff.’

Laura had gone to the toilet. I made a mental note to tell her about Ion’s book, knowing she would find it amusing.

As Ion was about to elaborate on his work in progress, the train pulled into a station. It was almost deserted, just a man in his sixties with an enormous, boxy suitcase.

Alina, to my surprise, jumped up and slipped through the door, helping the man onto the train, carrying his case into the carriage. The old man, who looked strong and fit enough to be able to handle the suitcase himself, thanked her in his own language then headed off to a seat at the other end of the carriage.



The four of us chatted for the next hour. Ion wanted to know all about the app I’d developed and we talked about that for a while, while Laura and Alina, who had come out of her cocoon after helping the older man, chatted about travel. Flattered by how interested and impressed Ion seemed—I was used to my friends’ eyes glazing over when I said anything at all about the app—I temporarily forgot all about my confidentiality agreement.

Towards the end of this conversation Hungarian border guards, wearing blue jackets and yellow high-visibility vests, got on the train and checked our passports. They studied Alina’s passport for a long time before finally passing on to the next passenger. Like the police at the station, they had guns on their hips.

After they’d gone and I’d put our passports and tickets back in my backpack, Laura whispered in my ear, ‘That guy was staring at me again.’

‘What?’

‘He’s looking at my reflection in the window.’

‘Are you sure you’re not being paranoid?’

‘Maybe. I don’t know.’ She flexed her shoulders and arched her neck. ‘I’m so tired.’

‘I know. Me too.’ I yawned.

‘But this seat is too uncomfortable.’

Ion, who had just returned from the toilet, overheard. ‘Hey, there’s an empty sleeping compartment just down the corridor. Why don’t you go and have a nap in there?’ His voice was hushed, conspiratorial. ‘It will be a couple of hours before the Romanian guards come through and we can keep an eye out for you, come and wake you just after we cross the border.’

'I don't know,' Laura said.

'It will be fine,' Ion said.

'I think it's a good idea,' I said to Laura.

She pulled a face, torn between her desire for sleep and her dislike of breaking rules.

'Go on, Laura,' Alina said. 'I promise we'll wake you.'

'I don't know.'

'Come on,' I said. 'I'll set an alarm on my phone too. What time are we due to cross the border?'

Ion checked his watch. 'We left Budapest forty minutes late, so it will be about three-te
You've got just under two hours.'

'Oh, all right,' Laura said. 'Thank you.'

She glanced across the carriage and I saw what had made her mind up. The man was staring
her again, the tip of his tongue resting between his lips, one leg jiggling up and down. Slowly, I
looked away, a smirk on his face.

Chapter Three

The sleeper compartment was tiny, containing two narrow bunks with a gap of around three feet between them. Outside the window: blackness. We were deep in the Hungarian countryside now. I could hardly even imagine what the landscape would look like outside the window. Forests? Plains? I pressed my face against the window. I couldn't even see any stars. If it wasn't for the occasional flicker from an isolated building, the train could be hurtling through space. We could be anywhere. We could be at the end of the world.

Laura kicked off her boots and flopped down on one of the bunks. I sat opposite her and took my phone out of the front pocket of my backpack. The battery was almost dead—the bloody thing was *always* almost dead—but I set the alarm anyway, hopeful that it would last.

'So what do you think of our two new friends?' I asked.

'I'm not sure. He is a little in love with himself. Can't wait to read his book.' She raised her eyes to the ceiling. 'But Alina's graphic novel sounds interesting. She was telling me it's about female power, a kind of feminist twist on the typical superhero story. She said she'd send me a copy.'

'Cool.' I moved over to her bunk and bent to kiss her. 'You said you'd always wanted to have sex on a train.'

'You're priceless. Now, if you'd booked a sleeper like this for the whole night it might have been different. But the point of coming in here was to have a nap.'

'Come on, it will be exciting. Could you'—I leaned forward to kiss her—'be persuaded?'

'Mmm. Maybe.' She kissed me back. I slid my hand up her smooth thigh and her breathing grew heavier; I could feel her heart fluttering as she pressed against me. 'Lock the door,' she said, breaking away. The flesh that covered her collar bone was flushed.

I stood up as best I could and tried the lock. 'Oh, for fuck's sake. It's broken. It won't lock.' That was probably why this compartment was empty.

'You'd better take a cold shower, then.'

She gave me another of the little smiles that I loved, turned away and faced the wall. I couldn't help but laugh. Foiled by a broken lock. I lay down on the opposite bunk and watched as her breathing changed. Within minutes, she was asleep.

I was determined to stay awake and took my phone out again to play a game, even though it was draining the battery. I had a plug converter somewhere in my backpack but was unable to gather the energy to heave myself off the bunk and find it. I was going to stay awake anyway, in case anyone tried to come through the unlocked door, so it didn't matter if my phone died soon. I'd charge it before we got to our destination, assuming I could find a socket.

I had dropped my phone in Italy, cracking the screen. I played the game for a while, peering through the spiderweb of cracks, aware of the growing heaviness of my eyelids. I told myself I would

stop playing in a minute, move around, have a drink of water. The train rattled and rocked me on my bunk. I needed to stay awake.

Closing my eyes, deciding it would do no harm to rest them.



I sat bolt upright. I was cold and sweaty and my mouth felt like the inside of a grave. My phone dropped to the floor with a thud. I'd been dreaming I was in a coffin and someone was knocking on the lid.

BANG BANG BANG.

Laura rolled over and opened her eyes, just as the door was yanked open and a thickly accented voice said, 'Passports.'

Chapter Four

I blinked at the guards, my sleep-sodden brain refusing to function.

The one in front had his arm outstretched. 'Passports.'

Laura sprang into action before me, crouching on the floor and unzipping the front pocket of my backpack.

The guards watched her. The one in front was in his thirties, overweight with a bald head and patchy stubble on his chin. His colleague was a little younger, with a neatly trimmed beard and intense blue eyes. They both wore the same impatient, pissed-off expression, like they had just been told their wages were being cut. The guidebook said the Romanian border guards were welcoming and friendly, so I smiled at them and nodded. They didn't smile back.

Laura looked over her shoulder at me, an anxious expression on her face, then unzipped the front pocket on her own backpack. She rummaged inside, then turned back to me, her face pale.

'They're not here,' she said to me.

'What?'

The guards watched as I scooted onto the floor beside her, sticking my hand into the front pocket where I always kept our passports, tickets and money.

'They were in here,' I said quietly. 'Definitely. I put the passports back in here after the Hungarian guards checked them.'

'Are you sure?' Laura hissed.

'Yes.' I was aware that my voice was trembling slightly. 'Didn't you see me?'

'I don't know.' Her eyes were wide, panic creeping in. 'I wasn't really looking.'

'Come on,' the bald guard barked.

I held up my hands. 'Sorry, one moment.'

He tapped his foot metronomically, a hollow sound that echoed around the compartment. I searched the side pockets of the backpack, finding nothing but some chewing gum and various screwed-up receipts and leaflets. As Laura searched her own backpack, I stuck my hand into the main compartment. My hand touched something that felt like a passport and my heart leaped for a moment, but it was just a pamphlet I'd picked up in a museum in Barcelona.

I thought hard. Had I definitely put the passports back? Perhaps I had absent-mindedly set them on the ledge where we'd been sitting with Alina and Ion. No. I remembered unzipping the backpack because the zip had got stuck and required some yanking before it would fasten. I had definitely put them back in the front pocket.

The guard's foot continued to tap. I glanced up at Laura. She had gone even paler.

'They're gone,' I said, the second word sticking in my throat.

The bald guard said something in Romanian to his colleague, his voice bear-deep and

humourless.

I stood up. 'Our passports, our tickets . . . They've been stolen.'

The guard glared at me, then at Laura, who stood beside me. I reached out for her hand, squeezing it. The guard noticed this and sneered.

'We're British,' I said, as if this would make some sort of difference, and now they both wore sneers. A part of me was tempted to make my ludicrous comment into a joke, mention the Queen, Harry Potter, Manchester United. I bit my tongue.

'What are your names?' Bald Guard asked.

We told them. Daniel Sullivan, Laura Mackenzie.

I was confident this could be sorted out. They would be on our side. We were victims of crime, and the thief must still be on the train. Had it stopped briefly to let the guards on? I hadn't noticed. Whatever, we were the ones who had been wronged and these men, these figures of authority would be able to help us. OK, so we weren't supposed to be in the sleeper compartment, but it had been empty. In England, if you travel in the wrong part of the train or without a ticket, you are asked to pay the difference or get a penalty fare. This would all be OK.

'Someone must have come into the carriage while we were asleep,' I said. 'Stolen our things.'

I had no idea if the guards could understand me. They stared at me blankly. Then Bald Guard, who appeared to be more senior, said something to Bearded Guard, who left the compartment, stalking off down the corridor.

Bald Guard picked up my backpack and began to pull items out of it. My clean T-shirts, the *Europe by Rail* guidebook, my sunglasses. There was a carrier bag full of dirty laundry at the bottom of the bag. I saw him lift it out and open it, then grimace and recoil. He dropped it with the rest of the items he'd removed on the bunk and grunted, then picked up Laura's bag. He unzipped it and peered inside, throwing her make-up bag onto the floor.

'Hey,' I said. 'You can't do that.'

Ignoring me, he rifled through Laura's backpack, pulling out her carrier bag of dirty clothes and pushing it back in immediately. Then he pulled out a clean black and pink bra, held it up and looked straight at Laura's chest. I stepped in front of her and he laughed, throwing the bra on to the small pile of our possessions, dropping the backpack beside mine.

Laura sat down on the bunk and began stuffing our things back into the two backpacks. She was shaking and all I wanted to do was comfort her, make it all better. Make this stop.

I felt the need to say something to the guard, to appeal to him, make him understand, but before I could think of anything useful to say the bearded guard returned. With him was another man, the one tall and thin with a grey face. He was wearing a rail company uniform. In his hand was a long sheet of paper containing what I assumed was a list of bookings. He ran his finger down the list and shook his head.

The railway guard and the two border guards exchanged sentences rapidly.

Bald Guard pointed at me, groping in his memory for the English words he required, and at that moment Alina arrived.

'Thank God,' I said. Someone who could speak Romanian. She would be able to explain everything to them. I had never felt so pleased to see someone.

'Alina, we've had our passports stolen, and our tickets and all our money. Can you explain them? I don't think they understand.'

I wanted Alina to appear business-like, calm, but she seemed nervous, jittery. She spoke to the men in their mother tongue, the words fast and hard.

Bald Guard shook his head, pointing at us and then at the list that the railway guard held.

Alina listened, then turned to us. 'They say you're not supposed to be in here. That th

compartment should be empty.'

—~~Well, yes, I wanted to say to her. Perhaps you could tell them it was your boyfriend's idea?~~ But where would that get me?

The man in the rail uniform spoke. His voice was thin, emphysemic.

'They're accusing you of being . . .' Alina groped for the word, came up with something she must have remembered from movies. 'Stowaways?'

'Fare dodgers,' I said. 'But we had tickets. Ordinary tickets. They were stolen. Please tell them we're sorry, we know we shouldn't have come into the sleeper carriage. But we bought tickets. We're the victims of a crime.'

She nodded and, I assumed, relayed this to the men.

The bald guard exclaimed a universal word: 'Hah!'

Alina spoke to him again, raising her voice, her nervousness giving way to anger. I could tell from the way they were looking at her—at the leather jacket, her boots, her hair and make-up—that they thought she was some kind of freak. Had she been dressed smartly, or been older, more conservative-looking, perhaps everything would have been different. Or perhaps it was her manner. Alina, I realised too late, was not the best ambassador, and soon they were arguing, she and the bald guard, both their voices increasing in volume, their words piling on top of one another, neither listening to the other.

A man in the adjacent compartment poked his head out and the bearded guard shouted at him, prompting him to shut the door quickly.

The argument between Alina and the guard escalated, firing harsh words at each other. Suddenly, the guard put up his hand and spat out a single syllable—'Stop' or 'Enough'?—and said something to the railway guard, who nodded and scurried away.

The bald guard pointed at Laura and me and said, 'Come.'

Alina protested and he pushed her, propelling her along the corridor. She kept trying to turn back, still arguing, but he put his hand between her shoulder blades and shoved her.

'What's happening?' I said, following behind. 'Alina?'

She didn't reply, just continued to pour forth a stream of Romanian.

'The train's slowing,' Laura said in a hushed voice.

She was right. We were slowing down as if we were coming into a station, the brakes squeaking. The guard yanked open the door that led into the area between the carriages, and pushed Alina through, ordering 'Come, come,' to Laura and me.

The train continued to slow, and the vast blackness outside was punctuated by a few weak lights. The train slowed and halted, brakes emitting a high-pitched whine, and I rocked back, banging my shoulder on the wall. The train came to a standstill and the doors hissed and slid open. I looked out past the guard and Alina at a small, open-air station, the platform a foot below where we stood.

It was only then that I realised what was happening. I said, 'No,' but the guard ignored me. He pushed Alina off the train, causing her to fall onto her knees on the dark platform, and then he yanked Laura's arm, propelling her off the train too. She made a gasping sound as she half-fell, half-jumped, landing on her feet and managing to stay upright. Finally, the guard shoved me off the train. I turned to shout at him, to plead, and he threw our backpacks off after us. They landed with a thump.

'You can't do this!' I shouted, but he just stood there, blocking the exit until the doors slid shut, his eyes cold and hard. Moments later, the train heaved into motion, and as we stood there, stunned, someone appeared at the window where we'd been sitting originally, before we made that idiotic decision to move: Ion, a shocked expression on his face.

The train pulled away, gathering speed, out of the station. I watched as it slid into the darkness, leaving us behind, standing in the half-light, on a platform in the middle of nowhere.

Chapter Five

I was frozen for a minute, barely able to process or believe what had just happened. I stared at the space where the train had been until the night swallowed it up and I couldn't even hear it anymore. The full moon came into view, bathing the spot where we stood with weak light. Stars were dotted here and there. With the train gone, everywhere was silent. No crickets throbbing in the grass. No traffic rushing on nearby roads. All I could hear was my own heavy breathing.

Slowly, my eyes adjusted to the darkness. We were in the middle of the countryside somewhere, not too far, I assumed, from the Romanian border, though it was impossible to estimate how much ground the train had covered before the guards had expelled us. And I wasn't familiar with Romanian geography. All I knew was that it was an alien landscape, and that we were a very long way from home.

On my left (without a compass I had no way of knowing what direction I was facing), the ground rolled and swelled, an undulating landscape of hills and valleys, trees clinging to steep slopes, an expanse of water in the distance winking silver when the moon showed its face. Beyond, looking down on the hills like elders standing guard over their children, were mountains, jagged and foreboding. They reminded me of the Tolkien books I'd read as a teenager, the hobbits setting off on a treacherous journey in search of the Ring.

In the other direction the ground was flat and covered in thick forest which stretched for miles. In the far distance, beyond the forest, another row of jagged mountains formed the horizon. A number of silent birds, black in the dim light, rose from the trees on the forest's edge before swooping and vanishing again. During the day, with the sun shining, it would no doubt be beautiful. But not now. Not on a night like this.

The station was tiny, with just two platforms which were connected by a narrow footbridge. There were no lights; the station appeared to be out of use. There was a small, wooden building with weathered, flaking paintwork that would have once been the ticket office, I guessed. I turned in a slow circle. There were a few dark, similarly abandoned-looking buildings nearby. It looked like a village, a settlement really, that had died at some point in the not-too-distant past.

'Daniel?'

I turned slowly to face Laura, who stood hugging herself on the dimly lit platform.

'Daniel,' she said again, more urgently.

I stepped over to my girlfriend and pulled her into an embrace, feeling her soft hair against my face. The temperature had dropped significantly and she was shivering in her shorts and T-shirt. Goosebumps rippled on the flesh of her arms, her teeth chattered. I looked around for my backpack which lay on the concrete, its contents spilling out like guts. I dug out a hoodie, which I passed to Laura. She stared at it like she didn't know what it was.

‘Come on, sweetheart,’ I said. ‘Put it on.’

—She looked at me with wide eyes, jerking her head round at a movement in a tree overhead. A bird, its silhouette just visible among the black branches.

‘We’re going to be OK,’ I said, but I sounded like I was trying to reassure myself more than her.

In fact, she seemed to be recovering from the shock more quickly than me, as she cracked a weak joke: ‘When I said I wanted to go off the beaten track, I didn’t mean this far off it.’

Alina stood a few feet away, gazing along the tracks, seemingly in a trance.

‘Do you know where we are?’ I asked.

She didn’t reply.

‘Alina?’ I went up to her and, finally, she snapped out of it. I repeated my question.

She looked around and shook her head.

‘What the fuck just happened?’ I asked. ‘Where was Ion? And why didn’t you wake us like you said you would?’

She rubbed her eyes, shook herself awake. ‘I . . . I fell asleep.’

‘And Ion?’

‘He went to the dining car to get something to eat. I must . . . I guess I was only asleep for five minutes, maybe ten. When I saw the border guard and the ticket inspector heading towards you, I jumped up straight away, came to help.’

‘And that went really well.’

She hung her head. ‘I’m so sorry.’ Then her eyes lit up. ‘That guard—what a fucker. If I ever see him again, I’m going to kick his ass so bad.’

‘I’m cold.’

We both turned around. Laura was still hugging herself, her eyes as round and wide as the sun that had burned so brightly on the first part of our trip. The beaches of Italy and Spain seemed a very long way away now.

I tried to hug her again but this time she flinched away.

‘If you’d booked us into a sleeper carriage in the first place, hadn’t been so bloody tight.’

I protested. ‘We might still have been robbed.’

‘No. No, we wouldn’t.’ She raked her hands through her hair and sighed. ‘I shouldn’t have agreed to go into the sleeper carriage. I knew it was a bad idea.’

‘I thought it would be OK . . .’ I trailed off. ‘I’m sorry.’

Alina turned away to give us privacy and produced a crumpled packet of cigarettes from her pocket. She lit one, sucked on it hungrily, then looked over her shoulder. ‘At least you guys still have your stuff. All mine is still on the fucking train.’

‘Have you got a phone?’ I asked.

She checked her jeans pockets, pulling out her passport, glancing at it, and sighing. ‘No. It was in my bag.’

‘And mine is dead.’ The battery had shed its last scraps of energy while I was asleep. ‘Laura?’

‘It’s in my backpack.’

She knelt and rummaged through the backpack, then raised her face to the sky. ‘It’s not there. They must have stolen it along with the other stuff.’

I swore. ‘Someone must have looked into the compartment, seen us asleep, decided to try their luck. Hey, maybe it was that guy. The one who kept staring at you. Did you see him, Alina? Did he leave the carriage?’

‘I don’t know. I didn’t see.’ She took a long drag on her cigarette.

‘It doesn’t matter, does it?’ said Laura. ‘It’s all gone. We’ll never know who it was.’ She

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